

Shapeshifting As A Posthumanist Mechanism In Africanfuturistic Fiction

Oghenetejiri EGHENEJI & Professor Enajite OJARUEGA

Department of English and Literary Studies, Delta State University Abraka, Nigeria

Abstract : *This paper investigates the role of the shapeshifter in Africanfuturistic narrative, especially as it pertains to posthumanism. The paper investigated the shapeshifter as a posthuman subject who embodies the idea of fluidity and disrupts binary systems that foster injustice. This paper situates Nnedi Okorafor as essential to Africanfuturism and thus engages two of her fictional narratives, *Who Fears Death* and *Lagoon*. The paper highlights binary systems within the texts that engender conflicts, injustice, and chaos in the fictional societies. These binary oppositions in the texts that predicate conflicts affirm Wynter's assertion of our current mode of being human as flawed. By employing qualitative content analysis, the paper unveils how the shapeshifter, through embodiment, nullifies established binary oppositions. The paper concludes that Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* and *Lagoon* provide examples of narratives that envision a posthuman future of Africa through the operation of the shapeshifter. The paper affirms that manifestations of hybridity, inter- and intra-species codependence, fluidity, relationality, and diversity are markers of a posthuman subject and society.*

Key words: Africanfuturism, shapeshifter, binaries, Okorafor, posthumanism

Introduction

Africanfuturism is a subgenre of African fiction that interrogates how globalization and technological advances have revolutionized material experiences for Africans. Africanfuturistic narratives speculate about the future of Africans and Africans in the diaspora based on the current state of reality. Africanfuturism was coined in 2019 by Nnedi Okorafor in a blog post. She classifies her fictional narratives that blend fantasy and science fiction as Africanfuturistic. The term was coined to create a distinction to the already extant term, Afrofuturism. This term was coined because Africanfuturism, unlike the latter, takes as its point of locus Africa and how it branches out into the diaspora. Afrofuturism is reliant on African material realities, culture, history, cosmologies, and mythologies. Okorafor argues that, despite the potential for afrofuturism to underscore global blackness, in practice it has privileged African American concerns while marginalizing those of Africa (Hodapp, 2021, p. 2). The geographical limitations of Afrofuturism therefore necessitate Africanfuturism.

Africanfuturism, in keeping with the ethos of Black art, which Deekard identifies as "resistance and mapping explications" (2019, p. 93), serves as a counter discourse in order to breed transcendence of inequality. This aligns with Shirinde's observation that "one of the objectives of Africanfuturism includes imagining a new space and time that is radically different from the stereotypical representations of the "dark continent," which is constantly drenched in a cycle of poverty, corruption, violence, and disaster" (2022, p. 28). These narratives contend existing realities that had long been centred on reinforcing extant power structures that are not beneficial to Africa's transformation.

This study is hinged on the recognition of Africanfuturistic narratives to advance the ethos of Black art that possesses transformational capacity by critiquing the present interlocking system of oppression and exploring enlightened possibilities for the future. The study contextualises systems of oppression within the premise of posthumanism and its critique of binaries as well as explores the possibilities of transcending oppressive systems through the shapeshifter. Shapeshifting that subsumes resistance, especially to echt identity and dualistic notions, marks the content of selected narratives. The study explores the way Nnedi Okorafor deploys shapeshifting as a tool for posthuman engagement in her narratives, particularly *Who Fears Death* (2010) and *Lagoon* (2014). Despite the cruciality of the shapeshifter to a desirable African future, not much attention has been given to this subject and its role in Africanfuturistic fiction. Therefore, this paper redresses this lack of attention by evaluating the role of the shapeshifter in Okorafor's narrative.

The African subject's inherent hybridity, resulting from a dual heritage of cultural and colonial influences, is reflected in Africanfuturistic narrative as a bricolage of fragmented reality. The shapeshifter is situated within this space of multiplicity. Africanfuturistic narratives oscillate between multiple parallels: past and future, reality and fantasy, science and culture, spiritual and material, humans and animals, machines and organisms, and they show no incompatibility exists in this contiguity. Thus, Africanfuturism opposes episteme that advances the continued hegemony within binaric relationships while revealing other modes of being/existence, including shapeshifting, that enable transformation. Hence, it stands with the revolutionary echoes of decolonial articulations, especially as posited in posthumanism.

Posthumanism

Wynter notes that our current universal understanding and definition of what it means to be human is purely biological, hence natural. This understanding is tethered to Darwin's evolutionary and natural selection theory. This biocentric understanding of what it means to be human sustains a binary and taxonomical system long established by the Judeo-Christian contrivance of human existence. The biocentric definition of man by a single ethno-class became isomorphous with a universal mode of being

human and hence gave credence to that ethno-class mode of being human that conditions certain dichotomies. This biocentric understanding of what it means to be human is what posthumanist scholars critique as flawed.

The contention of their oeuvre on posthuman is that the human has been misconceived by nearly every thinker in the Western tradition, and this misconception has come to be over-represented through our own reenactment of the initial erroneous conception. They try to elucidate how our current mode of being human is a product of a particular epistemology even though it appears as natural, unquestionable, and preexisting, even our very existence. Our current understanding of what it means to be human embeds a hierarchical reasoning that has created some of the most injurious legacies and continues to do so in our existential relation. Binarism presupposes this hierarchical understanding, and in this binary system, one has to be negated for the other to be validated.

While conceptualisations of the posthuman have not been homogeneous, all its facets have been tethered to a stable position, which is that our present definition of the human is limited. To Fanon, the sway of Europe between atomic and spiritual disintegration is testament to this flawed conception of the human (Fanon, 1963, p. 314). Posthuman critics like Wynter provide a revisionary interpretation that traces the historical itinerary of the current genre of being human that has come to condition modes of relation between humans and animals, organisms and machines, and human (We) and human (Other) based on phenotypical difference or degree of rationality. Posthuman critics believe that to ensure the continued survival of our species, we have to unravel how our current definition of the human came to be and how it can be altered to become more sustainable for our existence now and in the future. The study, by engaging futuristic narratives, looks at how the posthuman subject who does not engage in re-establishing dichotomies and binaries is established.

Posthuman critics ask questions on what it means to be human beyond dichotomies such as white versus Black, rational versus irrational, or nature versus culture. These questions are asked while deconstructing traditional knowledge formations based on these binary or radical, mutually exclusive, and inherently gendered and racialised oppositions and their built-in hierarchies. Critical posthumanism seeks to promote new ways of knowing that focus on aspects of entanglement, co-implication, hybridity, and interdependence (Herbrechter, 2018, p. 4). For Wynter, the origin stories that give credence to binary systems need to be undone, and the human has to be conceptualised as a hybrid.

Wynter describes the human in hybrid terms as a nature-culture entity (2003, p. 280), a hybrid 'bios and mythoi' figure or homo narrans in her terms. What we are called to understand with these propositions is that our knowledge of humans is not purely a product of nature, as a biological perspective would have us believe, but it is also a product of culture arising from our self-instituted myths. The study explores how the shapeshifter creates a different descriptive statement of what it means to be human by eluding binary restrictions and taxonomical barriers. Despite the diversity amongst conceptions by posthuman critics, Gorbachyova notes that one of the overarching themes they all pursue is the one similar to shapeshifting, in which key descriptions of the posthumanist subject and subjectivity would be best described by fluid and water. Just as someone who is protean is capable of changing his shape at will, the posthumanist subject is theorised to be nomadic and fluid in the same way (2021, p. 15).

The Shapeshifter.

A shapeshifter is a subject with the ability to effect self-transformation and sometimes transformation outside the self. The shapeshifter subject redefines the concept of the human away from its dualistic basis, that is, the separation of the self and other, that preserves domination of one group over all those constituted as "others," including the female and nonhumans (animals and machines). The other becomes part of the self, preventing one side being dominant. The act of shapeshifting subverts mutual exclusivity since the shapeshifting can embody both sides of established dichotomies, thereby dismantling the distinction between such.

The shapeshifter is un-mimetic to conceptions of the Western bourgeois capital-M Man, which is over-represented, as Wynter asserts. The shapeshifter, through her manipulation of both her form and that of others, reorders notions that reproduce and overproduce dualistic and hegemonic values. One of the central motifs connecting all forms of shapeshifting, notes Romberg, "is power—the power to do things or obtain abilities that would otherwise have been impossible in the pre-metamorphosis state" (Huber, 2022, p. 19). The power to contrive a different existence and envision a different future free from current systems of oppression is evident in the shapeshifters of selected narratives. Through the act of shapeshifting, the shapeshifter ventures into an alternative mode of being or imagines existence otherwise. Shapeshifting is closely tied to surpassing the limits of identity, especially as conceived by social norms. To transcend both physical and social identity is to engage in other ways of existing that prove to be liberatory for both the individual and society. The shapeshifters in our selected narratives serve as the reimagination of the human as an evolved subject ethically conscious of the human/non-human connections. Their act of shapeshifting is utilised to build entanglement between species and engendered transformation.

Establishing Binaries in Selected Texts

Who Fears Death by Okorafor is a post-apocalyptic narrative set in a future where technology has been displaced by juju after a transgression by the people that populate the fictional world. A significant part of the plot takes place in the desert, highlighting both the future condition of the world as it returns back to nature and the relationship between humans and the natural environment. Okorafor presents the warring light-skinned Nuru and dark-skinned Okeke to mirror the Darfur conflict of Sudan, fought between the Arabs and Africans. The war and its effect are presented through the experience of Onyesonwa, an Ewu girl born of rape. She is the product of the violent encounter between a Nuru man and an Okeke woman. She struggles for self-identification because of her

proximity to both opposing tribes. The opposing ethnic groups in this text set the binary system that is responsible for a conflation of violent acts. Najeeba describes the people of both ethnic groups:

The Nuru people had yellow-brown skin, narrow noses, thin lips, and brown or black hair that was like a well-groomed horse's mane. The Okeke had dark brown skin, wide nostrils, thick lips, and thick black hair like the hide of a sheep (2010, p. 31)

Okorafor set the distinction in this narrative based on phenotypical and even geographical differences that are further highlighted by the origin story in a holy text called the Great Book. In accordance with the dictation of the Great Book, the Nuru wage an unending war against the Okeke in a bid to exterminate them. This ethnic tension is the central conflict of the text. The Great Book defines the identity of both the Nurus and Okekes, and their relationship is confined to this identification. A storyteller character in the text renders what is codified in the Great Book:

From the sun, Ani plucked the Nuru. She set them on her land. That same day, flowers realized they could bloom. Trees understood that they could grow. And Ani laid a curse on the Okeke. " 'Slaves,' Ani said...The Nuru to this day point at the Okeke and say, slave and the Okeke must bow their heads in agreement. That is the past" (p. 91)

The master and slave relationship that is sanctioned by the Great Book is entrenched in the psyche and functioning of the society, this relationship succeeds war, raids and the violence that is prevalent in the Seven River Kingdom. The Nurus in their belief of distinction and armed with ideas of being inherently superior spearhead a reign of terror as exemplified by this passage from the text:

There were bodies in the street. Many were burned, unrecognizable. During these kinds of raids, the Nuru soldiers took the strongest Okeke men, tied them up, doused them with kerosene, and set them afire (p. 28).

The novel is preoccupied with the shapeshifter heroine's quest and struggle to put an end to static ideas of belonging and the binaries these ideas establish. This leads her to the Great Book. Enshrined in the monumental book is the justification for the hegemonic relationship between the Nuru and Okeke people that has fostered and preserved the war. The novel reveals the chaos that accompanies a binary system, critiquing primarily ethnic violence and racial war while addressing issues of environmental despoilation, gender exclusion perpetuated by male secret societies, and religious extremism.

In Okorafor's *Lagoon*, issues of ecological crisis take precedence. Serrano notes how the Nigerian society is largely dependent on oil for its economic survival; he states that "Shell is the most important foreign stakeholder" (2020, p. 46). This dependency on oil is critiqued in *Lagoon*. Petro-culture and the damages it renders are considered through the agency of aquatic characters, especially the swordfish, who opens the narrative by destroying a pipeline.

In this text, there is a distinction between the aquatic and terrestrial beings as well as humans and their environment. This distinction presupposes the act of pollution. While this binary system is not fully explored in the text, monologues, dialogues, and the antagonistic actions of the aquatic creatures toward humans at sea give testament to the existence of this binary. The narrator describes through the swordfish fish:

They brought the stench of dryness, then they brought the noise and made the world bleed black ooze that left poison rainbows on the water's surface [...] The ones who bring the rainbows are burrowing and building creatures from the land and no one can do anything about them (2014, p. 12).

Through this passage, the attitude of the sea creatures towards the menacing presence of humans at sea is revealed. The humans display a total disregard of both the sea creatures and their habitat by polluting the environment. Later in the narrative, when the sea creatures attack humans, Ayodele reveals, "It's the people of the waters; they are tired of boats and human beings" (p. 211). The difference in their relationship to the ecosystem is the cause of this division. The hegemonic system that allows humans to stay at the top of a hierarchical structure and dominate injuriously over the earth necessitates the retribution of the aquatic creatures.

This hierarchical system is also evident in the relationship between humans and aliens. Because of an assumed level of superiority by humans, especially the male characters in the text, they conspire to exploit the existence of the aliens. This malevolent display intensifies the distinction between humans and aliens, creating another major binary opposition within the text. Ayodele describes her experience thus: "Your people. They wanted to use me, kidnap me, kill me" (p. 268). The opposition between humans and aliens results in the major violence within the text, the death of the soldier, and Ayodele's death. The aura of the fictional Lagos mirrors the real Lagos, and the narrative operates within the same binaries and inequalities that exist in the real world: gender binary, species taxonomy, inequality/discord in the ecosystem, and class division. These divisions shape the relationships in the text to produce a narrative of mayhem.

The Heroine as a Shapeshifter

The heroines in both *Who Fears Death* and *Lagoon* are shapeshifters who can alter their physical form as well as the physical form of others and other aspects of material reality. The act of alteration is usually for the purpose of transformation or to give proper agency to non-humans. The heroine is a posthuman subject because of her ability to embody fluidity and discard binaries through transgression of boundaries. In *Who Fears Death*, Onyesonwu is the hybrid heroine who is a shapeshifter. She is able to

resist restrictive norms because of her identity. Onyesonwu's identity as both Nuru and Okeke and neither means she is not bound to the jurisdiction of the Great Book, as there is no role inscribed for her or other Ewu children; she has to forge her own path in respect to her hybrid identity. Okorafor takes this state of hybridity further by making Onyesonwu an Eshu, someone with the ability to practice magic, manipulate the mystic point, and shapeshift.

Her magical powers allow for transformation, both of her physical form and transformation between her physical world and the immaterial world of the wilderness. The heroine, Onyesonwu, transcends manifold boundaries as an Ewu. She is both Okeke and Nuru—yet neither. As an Eshu, she is able to change form, becoming whatever animal she chooses, and she is able to pass through her physical world and escape to the spirit world. Her ability to alter her physical form is first experienced when she was eleven. She turned into a sparrow after touching its bloodied feathers. As the narrative progresses, she changes into a vulture, and Mwita reveals to her the mystical part of her identity:

"There was a vulture," I said. "Looking right at me. Close enough for me to see its eyes. I threw a rock at it and as it flew off, one of its feathers fell off. A long black one. I . . . went and picked it up. I was standing there wishing I could fly as it did. And then . . . I don't . . ."

"You changed," Mwita said. He was looking at me very closely.

"Yeah! I became the vulture. . ."

"You're an Eshu," he said.

"A what?" The word sounded like a sneeze.

"An Eshu. You can shape-shift, among other things. I knew this the day you changed into that sparrow and flew into the tree" (pp. 57-58)

Onyesonwu, as an Eshu and an Ewu, merges identities that are otherwise conflicting. Through this intersecting identity, Okorafor calls into question strict gender and ethnic roles and weaves a narrative that leaves her heroine dismantling the societally ordained roles. As an Eshu and Ewu shapeshifter, Onyesonwu threatens both ethnic and gender exceptionalism. Through her shapeshifting, powerful abilities, the narrative disrupts the notion of gender and ethnic role. Thus, discard the binaries that establish such roles, that is, Okeke and Nuru, Male and Female. In Jwahir, Onyesonwu's village of residence, a female is not allowed to learn the Great Mystic point that helps harness the full potential of an Eshu's power, including shapeshifting. A conversation between Aro and Onyesonwu reveals the confines a system built on conflicted opposition imposes:

You're full of fire," he said. "But I won't teach you." He motioned with his hand up and down, in reference to my body. "Your father was Nuru, a foul dirty people. The Great Mystic Points are an Okeke art only for the pure of spirit."

"B-but you teach Mwita," I said working hard to control my despair.

"Not the Mystic Points. What I teach him is limited. He's male. You're female. You can't measure up. Even in . . . the gentler skills."

"How can you say that?" I shouted, my diamond almost flying from my mouth (p. 67).

This conversation reveals the deeply stereotypical thought patterns prevalent in the fictional society. Aro refers to the whole of Nuru ethnicity as "foul and dirty" because of the actions of some and even classifies Onyesonwu, who grew up as an Okeke, as one of them. The idea of an inherently good and bad ethnicity establishes further the divide in the kingdom. Aro also validates his denial of her desire on her gender. This action is repeated on multiple instances till Onyesonwu displays the extent of her power by fighting Aro and briefly bringing her stepfather back to life. Onyesonwu's existence as a shapeshifter that can manipulate material reality is able to surpass the boundaries between male and female that is predicated on inherent abilities. In the text, she can only fight Aro, who is otherwise superior in age and ability to her, through shapeshifting. Through shapeshifting, Onyesonwu gains power that liberates her. She describes this:

Above my head in a palm tree, a black vulture glowered down at me with probing eyes. I frowned and then froze with realization. That vulture wasn't a vulture, as it hadn't been five years ago when I saw it. Oh, how Aro could not have known that I knew every aspect of him, as I knew every aspect of any creature I'd changed into [...] This was why I felt such a rush of power whenever I changed into a vulture. I'd been changing into Aro as a vulture [...] this spirit place, I was the predator. On instinct, I flew at Aro. I knew how and where to attack him because I knew him (pp. 78-79).

Shapeshifting is used here to gain an advantage by embodying subjects that are distinct and gaining insights that would have been otherwise unavailable. She is able to switch roles from prey to predator because of her ability to shapeshift, and in her position of power, she is able to influence the system that allows the existence of preys and predators, domination and subjugation. Onyesonwu's shapeshifting abilities appear as an embodiment of her fluid and interconnected identities. She is enabled to not just disrupt social status quo but also existential hierarchies. Barreiro and Russo refer to shapeshifters as ambivalence made flesh and taxonomy-breaking beings who embody difference (2019, p. 13). As a shapeshifter, she is able to dissolve the boundaries that exist between herself and the different nonhuman creatures she encounters and imagines. Okorafor places Onyesonwu on an imbricated

borderland, utilizing shape-shifting abilities to erase the sharp delineation between humans and animals and access multiple points in time.

Rosenbaum writes that "shapeshifting creatively transgresses the boundary between human and nonhuman animal in order to build relationality with the earth" (2021, p. 47). Onyesonwu is able to live through the animals she embodies; hence, their existence becomes intertwined with hers. This interweaving of identity and being-hood is described below:

"according to what I know, whatever you've turned into, you retain the knowledge of it forever"
he said. "Does that feel right to you?" I nodded. When I focused on the idea, I felt the vulture and
the sparrow just below my skin (p. 53).

Instances of proximity between Onyesonwu and the nonhuman abound in the text. She changes to a sparrow, vulture, lizard, worm, ant, and a sphinx, all actions of shapeshifting, emphasising the relevance of all sentient life forms. Rosenbaum writes, "Rhetorical shapeshifting seems to represent an iteration of biophilia within the humanities; it discursively draws animals/nature intimately closer to human experience through embodiment. Shapeshifters weave empathy on the loom of biophilia (2021, p.54). Her empathy and love towards nature are also highlighted by her ability to talk to animals. She is not just able to change into different species; she is able to communicate with animals, as seen in her understanding of the needs of the desert camel. Her relationship with these animals speaks of her connection to and respect for nature. This relationship with nature paves the way for a different future narrative for both the Okeke and Nuru people.

The Okeke are restrained by a past of error that triggered an apocalypse. As recorded in the Great Book, "the Okeke sprang from the sweet rivers. They were aggressive like the rushing rivers, forever wanting to move forward... They fought and invented among themselves. They bent and twisted Ani's sand, water, sky, and air, took her creatures, and changed them(p. 91). The Okeke's mythic disregard for Ani, which led them to subdue the earth and its natural properties and abuse their authority, is mirrored by the current Nuru's escapade. The Nuru's are not respectful of the goddess Ani, as evident in their act of rape when the Okeke women went to pray, and they also abuse their power to dominate. They are as guilty as the Okekes in equipping systems of dichotomy that result in violence meted on nature and others. From the history of the Seven Rivers Kingdom, it follows that an apocalypse is the end line of this trajectory. Neither the Okekes nor the Nurus have immersed themselves in their natural world.

Onyesonwu's symbiosis with her natural environment, including the animals that populate it, shows that she has deviated from the path of discord forged by Nurus and Okekes. Her shapeshifting ability can be read as an act of reverence towards multiple species, hence, an atonement for the irreverence of her contrasting heritage. Even before she touches the Great Book, Onyesonwu already starts her process of shaping the future by rupturing the status quo of the present. As a shapeshifter, she avails herself of different perspectives by embodying different forms, gaining new, more-than-human, understanding of the world that transcends the dichotomy of her kingdom. Like Onyesonwu says, "As a vulture, I felt condescending when I looked at Jwahir, as if I knew greater places. All I wanted to do was ride the wind, search out carrion, and not return home" (p. 82). Her shapeshifting abilities empower her with the perception and feeling of other species; as a vulture, she felt powerful, like a predator (p. 291), combating her own prey status as a human. The fluid nature of this heroine makes it possible for her to learn new ways of viewing the world and receive unique insight about existence. When she changes into a Kponyungo, a mythical giant flying lizard (p. 99), in the desert, she gains access to a future world that influences her vision for her community. This place is described by her thus:

So much green, alive and heavy with water! ... This place was too far to ever get to. But maybe
someday it would not be. Maybe someday. It's vastness made the violence and hatred between
the Okeke and Nuru seem small (p. 259)

Kwanya writes, "Her ability to shapeshift into different animals and birds offers her alternatives to see the world without the oppressive categorisations sanctioned by the Great Book" (2022, p. 136). Onyesonwu's transgression of multiple boundaries allows her to navigate between perspectives not available to others. As the heroine of the story, these perspectives prop her mission for change. Her fluidity resists epistemologies that rely on subjugating hierarchies, and it nurtures an ontology of connection to nature. Onyesonwu's birth heritage and her shapeshifting abilities present a dimension of the mediatory power of the posthuman.

Okorafor constructs the character of the heroine, Onyesonwu, as a hybrid and transethnic sorceress who is conscious of her dual heritage and sensitive to the existence of other species and existential planes. This harmony in her identity, the ability to reach into different forms and spaces of existence, makes her the appropriate force to challenge binaries and hierarchies existing in her society and transform relationships that are conditioned by the binary system. In the text, this act is achieved through rewriting the Great Book. Onyesonwu's actions throughout the novel shed shackles imposed by a binary system and set up a path that accommodates the intense change she incurs at the end.

Onyesonwu rewrites The Great Book, shapeshifting both the text and the narrative it embodies. Her act of rewriting was not a physical act of rewriting. Onyesonwu sang and gave a part of herself to rewriting the book. She narrates, "My hand grew hot, and I saw the symbols on my right hand split. The duplicates dribbled down into the book, where they settled between the other symbols into a script I still couldn't read. I could feel the book sucking from me, as a child does from its mother's breast. Taking and taking. I felt something click within my womb" (p. 338). Onyesonwu is able to touch and change the book because she is a shapeshifter. All her experiences and struggles are transferred to the Great Book, giving it life like she was given life by two warring

groups. Hence, there is no toppling of one system for another because she is not one in exclusion of another. She is both and neither. This allows for a world where unity between the two tribes flourishes. A world bigger than binaries and inequalities like she saw when she shapeshifted into a Kponyungo. The narrator describes thus:

If Onyesonwu had taken one last look below, to the south, with her keen Kponyungo eyes she'd have seen Nuru, Okeke, and two Ewu children in school uniforms playing in a schoolyard. To the east, stretching into the distance, she'd have seen black paved roads populated by men and women, Okeke and Nuru, riding scooters and carts pulled by camels (p. 345).

Onyesonwu, as a shapeshifter, acts as the bridge that engenders the discarding of boundaries as her act of rewriting opens a future of possibility. Onyesonwu's ability to transcend planes of existence through shapeshifting is demonstrated by her act of rewriting, as she dismantles the narrative that allows hegemonic binaries in the Great Book. She changes the trajectory of both the past, present, and future. She acts as a bridge that allows her experience of conflation travel to amend the past, reshape the present, and condition the future. In the text, Onyesonwu says:

What I can tell you is that the book and all that it touched and then all that touched what it touched and so on, everything in that small sandstone hut began to shift. Not to the wilderness, that wouldn't have scared me. Someplace else. I dare say a pocket in time, a slit in time and space. To a place where all was gray, white, and black (p. 339).

Onyesonwu's ability to shapeshift extends beyond her physical form to include the Great Book narrative and the future, thus the society. She changes the shape of the society that was tolerant of binaries and inequalities. Altering her abilities allows other women to shapeshift in society. After Onyesonwu's actions, the narrator describes, "All the women, Okeke and Nuru, found that something had changed about them. Some could turn wine to fresh, sweet drinking water" (p. 341). The ability of the heroine to shapeshift is not just used to her personal advantage; she is able to transcend inequalities by embodying others as well as enable her society's transformation through altering the inherent structure of her society.

In Lagoon the heroine, Ayodele, is revealed as a shapeshifter as the narrative unfolds. Adaora speaks of the limitlessness of Ayodele because of her fluidity; the only thing constant about her identity is the ability to transform. In reference to Ayodele and her species, the narrator reveals, "They can be anything and are nothing; basically, she's a shape-shifter" (p. 32). Ayodele's power of transformation is extended to include other species:

Anthony held her gaze a bit longer, then turned back to the aquarium.

"Can you change into one of those?" Anthony asked Ayodele, pointing at a red shrimp with white stripes.

"I can," she said, pressing her face against the tank. "You know that."

Anthony nodded. "You can change yourselves but you can change the fish, too, right?"

"Precisely," Ayodele said. "We give them whatever they want" (p. 28).

Ayodele is not only able to change her form; she is able to manipulate matter and change the form of others. In the text, shapeshifting is a nonviolent means of resistance. Ayodele uses shapeshifting to enforce desirable changes and desired change to the status quo, hereby resisting the extension of existing confines. In the introductory chapter she grants a swordfish the ability to become a monster, so it could protect the aquatic environment from human pollution (p. 12). Her communication with the aquatic animals and her ability to understand their needs give agency to non-human beings, thereby complicating any comfortable distinction between humans and nonhuman beings while transforming the hierarchical relationship that places the human species at the center of Western epistemology (Serrano, 2020, p. 56).

Ayodele, through her fluid nature that personifies change, confronts and redresses the erasure and displacement of the animal species, the opposition between gender binaries, the gulf between leader and masses, and the subjection of nature to the whims of humans. Ayodele's character is one that unifies contradiction. She is a hybrid creature who inhabits multiple spaces at the same time as she is located in the interstices of binaries. This shapeshifter heroine embodies heterogeneity and seemingly diametric contradictions. In their first interactional encounter on land, Adaora refers to Ayodele as "it" and "her," both denying and affirming Ayodele's personhood. The mute boy on the beach expresses the same sentiment as he describes his perception of Ayodele's coming:

as it walked out of the water, even he knew it was not human. All his mind would register was the word "smoke." At least until the creature walked up the quiet beach and stepped into the flickering light from one of the restaurants. By then it had become a naked dark-skinned African woman with long black braids (p. 19).

This harmony of contradiction in her identity foretells her ability to challenge perceptions of normativity and collapse existential boundaries. As an extra-terrestrial being, the heroine acts as a mediator between aquatic beings and terrestrial beings, bridging the gap between both sides and enforcing codependency. This is evident in how she is able to allow communication between humans and non-humans. Her position as a bridge between worlds is not just restricted to enabling communication; her very existence embodies this bridge. She depicts the stark porosity of species boundaries through her manifold transmogrification. Ayodele's array of performative embodiments encompasses a wide spectrum of human and non-human avatars (Banks, Kayat, Rossmann, 2023, p. 7), including an old woman, Chris, Adaora's husband, Karl Marx, a monkey, a lizard, a spectral molecular mass, and a mermaid.

Both gendered binaries and species binaries are disrupted by Ayodele's being. She can be male or female, human or animal, according to situational context without showing preference for one form over the other. Ayodele bemoans the absence of this kind of unification—the realization of the mutability and interdependence of multiple identities amongst the human species. She says to Kola, "Human beings have a hard time relating to that which does not resemble them. It's your greatest flaw" (p. 65). Ayodele's statement echoes what is written earlier in the text about her state: "Her mannerisms were too calm, fluid, and alien. Adaora's husband, Chris, would instantly hate this woman for all of these reasons" (p. 22). In the text, there is a constant disregard of identities that do not fit into any dominant societal construct, and Ayodele struggles to reorient this system. Just like Nyamnjoh writes on Africanfuturist depictions of transhuman entanglement, this heroine's character is congruent with the concerns of the frontier Africans as they straddle myriad identity margins and constantly seek to bridge various divides in the interest of the imperatives of living interconnections (2015, p. 7). Ayodele's mission is to ensure change that encourages multiform diversity. She strives to extend the spectrum of identity to include those usually "othered" and considered alien. This is why Ayodele acts constructively and viciously when she encounters those who want to maintain the status quo of intolerance.

In most instances, Ayodele uses her powers of shapeshifting constructively by letting others see their prejudice does not inhibit her identity. When Chris expresses his violent tendencies towards women, especially his wife, Ayodele mirrors his appearance and forces him to confront the reality that identity is performed; hence his expectations of inherent submission from the female form and his notion of self-grandeur as a male are misplaced. She does not perform gendered roles, and she resists the exploitation and commercialization of her female form. When Father Oke, who Adaora describes as a predator (p. 45), sought to use Ayodele as a means of spectacle to aid his wealth and popularity, she changed into a monkey and refused to indulge him.

Ayodele also uses her shapeshifting powers viciously in the face of intolerance. In the text, under the leadership of a corrupt soldier, Benson, the authorities try to kill Ayodele as she stirred the process of change. Ayodele responds by temporarily disintegrating her human form, and in the process, she takes and transforms the lives of those involved; the narrator describes thus:

the wet piles of meat, the scattered clothes, even the spattered blood, were gone as though they had never been there. In their place was a plantain tree, heavy with unripe plantain... Ayodele had taken the elements of oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, calcium, phosphorus, potassium, sulfur, sodium, chlorine, and magnesium that had been Benson and the other soldiers and rearranged them into a plant...(p. 123).

Banks, Kayat, and Rossaman write that, "like Haraway's myth of the cyborg, Ayodele casts doubt upon reductive dichotomies through her very existence. She subverts the Cartesian dualism that legitimizes patriarchy by overturning the subjugation of woman, nature, and body to man, culture, and mind (2023, p. 9). Ayodele upturns the conventions, especially when characters try to perpetuate violence. In the instance above, she reconfigures the idea of earth's interconnection, giving prominence to nature. She kills the humans and transforms the environment, giving life to a plant from the death of humans. By doing this, she reveals the compositional solitude; both plants, humans, and animals share basic components and survive on the interaction of compounds. This show of transmogrification potentially disrupts any rigid binaries enacted on the basis of physical difference, highlighting instead the shared similarities of all life forms. Through Ayodele's character, a bond is created revealing powerful networks of interconnections, like the one between the bodies and the plant. The vitality of this bond is based on sharing this planet, [...] on terms that are no longer so clearly hierarchical, nor self-evident" (Serrano, 2021, p. 55).

Ayodele's sacrificial death at the end of the narrative is the final act of shapeshifting and the ultimate act of collapsing binaries. Ayodele becomes a fog after she allows herself to be murdered. She realizes that true radical change requires more than physical shapeshifting. To be able to reorder the ideological stance of humans that sustains binary systems, change has to come from within. She reveals to Adaora the necessity of her death:

"You people need help on the outside but also within," she said. "I will go within... "You'll all be a bit alien." Slowly, Adaora laid Ayodele on the ground... In the space where Ayodele had lain a white mist swirled, as if a fog had rolled in off the water... this fog was rolling like a great wave over all of Lagos...And everyone was inhaling it (pp. 235-236).

She begets collective mutation and thus collective shapeshifting as she allows herself to become part of everyone in Lagos and beyond. Ayodele undoes the binary essentialism of human versus alien; she spurs a merging of both. Everyone is a bit alien and human, proffering a way out of the shackles of dualisms. They gain hybridity status, which spurs a change of consciousness through the dissolution of her physical form. To Banks, Kayat, and Rossmann, "Ayodele, in her demonstration of the inherent permeability of boundaries, reveals the inevitability of change in any ecosystem, be it organic or ideological" (2023, p. 17). The ideological change in the text only occurs after Ayodele sacrificed herself. The people of Lagos become more willing to adhere to the ideas of mutualism and are less oriented toward dualistic hierarchies.

In both texts, the ability of the heroine to shapeshift is used to engender radical change in the society. Onyesonwu alters the women in her society after reshaping the narrative of the Great Book, while Ayodele alters the humans in hers. These acts are their final instances of shapeshifting. Through these acts, societies that do not function within the previous constraints of binary systems are established. The heroine, through shapeshifting, influences her society to accommodate the sense of being aware that the borders

of self are not only fluid and constantly changing but, as is often repeated in posthumanism, are also co- and interdependent on everything around us (Gorbachyova, 2022, p. 71).

Conclusion

Africanfuturism is concerned with the future, engaging who and what is desirable in the conception of future Africa. The shapeshifter's ability to mediate between binaries, transgress oppressive systems, decenter power and overturn inequalities within the ecosystem is essential to a future that is concerned with preserving both humans and nonhumans and moving beyond the hegemonic relationship between both. This study has shown that the shapeshifter is sufficiently utilized in Africanfuturistic narrative. Shapeshifting enables the heroine's transcendence over binaries as it does not restrict the subject to positioning herself within two conflicting variables. Through shapeshifting the heroine is able to sustain and create inter-specie and intra-specie relationship and relationality.

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